MINNESOTA
MDH
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

Protecting, Maintaining and Improving the Health of All Minnesotans

December 20, 2002

Livestock and Seed Programs
Agriculture Marketing Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Stop 0249, Room 2092-S
Washington, DC 20250-0249

Attention Livestock and Seed Programs:

As the head of Minnesota's lead public health agency, I would like to express my strong support for USDA as it explores the possibility of purchasing irradiated food for the national school lunch program. I would also like to commend the current effort to obtain public input about the possibility of offering irradiated ground beef, and other irradiated products, in our schools. Parents, in particular, deserve to be heard on this issue, since the health of their children is at stake.

I am also concerned, however, that public comment on this issue could come to be dominated by narrowly focused advocacy groups – who represent neither the public nor the prevailing scientific and public health consensus on irradiation. Too often, these groups have tended to dominate the public conversation about this technology, leaving the public with a distorted impression of its risks and benefits.

The scientific consensus in favor of food irradiation is overwhelming. It is the most thoroughly studied food processing technology in human history – by a wide margin. Several decades of intensive research have failed to find any evidence of negative health effects associated with eating irradiated food. And we know that irradiation can effectively kill potentially dangerous disease-causing microbes like salmonella and *E. coli* O157:H7.

Irradiation is not a magic bullet, and we have never contended that it can or should replace the other elements that make up an effective food safety strategy. It's not a replacement for appropriate food production and food handling practices, both in the food industry and in the home. But we believe it provides a vitally important extra measure of protection. We believe it can have a significant impact on the thousands of food-related illnesses that occur every year in this country – illnesses that can sometimes be lethal, *especially* for young children. In public health terms, the potential benefits of irradiation

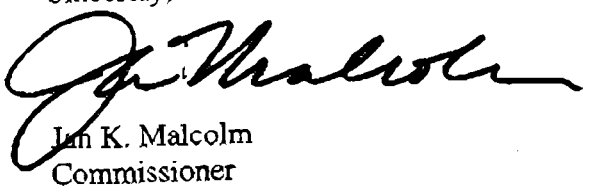
would be comparable to those achieved when pasteurization technology was first introduced in earlier era.

That's why irradiation technology has been endorsed by a long list professional groups and health-related government agencies, including the World Health Organization, the American Medical Association, the U.S. Public Health Service, the U.S. Food and Drug Association, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the American Dietetic Association.

The public has also tended to embrace this technology – *when* they have been provided clear and accurate information about what it is, and how it works. They tend to support irradiation once they learn that it doesn't – and can't – make the food radioactive; that the chemical changes that take place in irradiated food are really not much different from the changes caused by other food processing technologies; and that, when done properly, it has very little effect on the taste, appearance or nutritional content of food.

We believe that inclusion of irradiated foods in the school lunch program – with appropriate input and support from the nation's parents and educators – would be an important step forward. We hope that, in considering this issue, you will listen carefully to legitimate public opinion, as well as the prevailing scientific consensus on this technology. We also hope that you will not let these voices be drowned out by the claims of self-interested advocacy groups. This issue is too important to do otherwise.

Sincerely,



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